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### Toxicity Spectacle

Madeleine DeMichele

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# TOXICITY SPECTACLE

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## ABSTRACT

Landfills are locations designated for waste materials. Waste materials are collections of both sentimental and random objects. Objects can be fragile like paper napkins. Paper napkins collect marks and stains like notes and pen drawings. Notes and pen drawings usually feature scribbled words. Words gather together to tell stories. Stories are embedded in the objects discarded in Landfills. Landfills are locations designated for waste materials.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The first Law of Thermodynamics is the Law of Conservation of Energy which states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only transferred or transformed from one form to another.<sup>1</sup> There are reactions to our actions: the land soaks up all our work and our objects, they do not disappear. Land acts as a sponge, a memory-catcher, and absorber of everything we do. A landfill is a receptacle, a holder of events, and a record of these actions. These discarded objects are both useless and cherished, they tell stories and they are forgotten. The land has acted as a vacuum for objects: we have created the idea that trash can disappear. Stories are the way we have learned to relay, remember, and retell these object-memories. When the words that construct these stories are jumbled, disheveled, and displaced, the stories change.

## II. REVERENCE FOR THE MATERIAL

“Our tactile experiences are elemental. If we reduce their range, as we do when we reduce the necessity to form things ourselves, we grow lopsided.” —Anni Albers<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1. Madeleine DeMichele, *Toxicity Spectacle*, drypoint, paper napkins, turmeric powder, clothespins, installation is roughly 80" long, 2021

<sup>1</sup> NASA “First Law of Thermodynamics.” NASA, [www.grc.nasa.gov/www/k-12/airplane/thermo1.html](http://www.grc.nasa.gov/www/k-12/airplane/thermo1.html).

<sup>2</sup> Tanya Harrod, *Craft*, (Whitechapel Gallery, 2018), 27.

*Toxicity Spectacle* is a record, an account, an archive, a log of events, and a collection of evidence that shows instead of tells. The writing is hard to decipher, but the yellow turmeric powder seeps through the napkin and gathers on the surface in pools of vibrant powder. The object is in the midst of decay and looks like it might tear from the clothespin any minute. In the two rows, each of the six napkins stand in for layers final landfill cover. After waste (the first layer) has been dumped, gathered, and compressed in a landfill, there is “a grading layer, barrier layer, drainage layer, protective layer, and finally topsoil”<sup>3</sup> that conceal the trash in the ground.

These prints are on display, but I feel a deeper loyalty to the plates that made them. My loyalty is to the materials I am working with. My loyalty is to the plates. They are precious, and I am constantly returning to them. I chop the plate in half, flip it over, adore the oxidation stains, polish it, and start over.



Fig. 2. Madeleine DeMichele, back of copper plate for *Toxicity Spectacle*, 2021.  
(Front not pictured, 2019)

I bought this piece of copper two years ago, made an etching on it, and then packed it away in cardboard where it sat shuffling between long drives, many drawers, and piles of paper

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<sup>3</sup> Amalendu Bagchi, *Design, Construction, and Monitoring of Landfills*, (Wiley-Interscience, 1990), 218.

as I was leaving a chapter of my life behind. I carve into the same soft metal as I begin another transition. I was thinking about the same things then and I was thinking about different things then. I'm looking at my reflection in the copper that is just as distorted as my memory of the first time I printed the plate. I'm reminded of its own material past in a home of cardboard and newsprint; remembering all the tabletops it has sat on and all the reflections it has seen. Objects hold histories that become visible if you spend time looking for them. They are vehicles for stories that both compress and extend time.

I spend weeks with the plate and only hours with the final prints. I don't feel as loyal to the prints. They're too new, they haven't had any time to sit in the sun on a humid day as my palm streaks against the surface, and they haven't been accidentally dropped and then apologized to. They haven't been soiled by my fingerprints and they haven't given my hand a faint smell of metal. The prints are a product of my adoration for the plate, of the lines, and of the scratchy drypoint mark. These objects hold stories of their past owners and places, and get reused to take place in new stories.

### III. WORDS & STORIES



Fig. 3. Squeak Carnwath, *Message*, oil and alkyd on canvas, 82" x 82", 1991

Stories are often relayed from person to person; sometimes spoken, sometimes written down. In Squeak Carnwath's painting *Message*, the spaces between words are omitted while a cascading grid contains each letter form in a diamond shape. The painting's directionality is simultaneously moving downward, upward, left to right, right to left, diagonally, and randomly jumps in all directions to connect the colors. The letters begin to jumble and move despite the rigidity of the grid. *Shouldn't this be easier to decode?* It is clear how important recognition is to our understanding of images; the letters are spelling sentences that we should be able to understand, but we can't because of their arrangement. When the letters creating this communication system are arranged in an unrecognizable manner, the sentences seem broken and the story changes all of a sudden. These letters seem to carry more weight.

Most of the time text appears in our world with a clear function: to translate an idea. Its purpose is to relay this idea, to translate the abstract into the real. Letters of the alphabet are used so frequently that their shapes are most always immediately recognizable. So, what if the letter's inherent function is questioned, flipped on its head? What happens when text appears outside of a familiar context and is transformed into an unrecognizable image? How are the symbols and shapes that construct our written communication system understood, interpreted, or transformed if the text seems to not say anything?

It is in this exact moment (when the expected becomes a surprise) that the letters have a greater function. The words hold their literal meaning and the new relationship with lines and circles. Defined both by its literal definition and its evocative lines and color, the image holds a dual meaning.

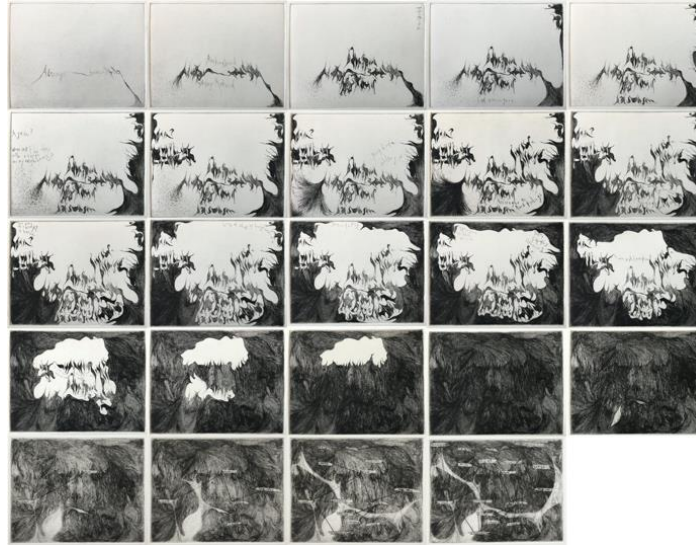


Fig. 4. Madeleine DeMichele *Growing, enveloping*, each print 4" x 5", drypoint, 2019

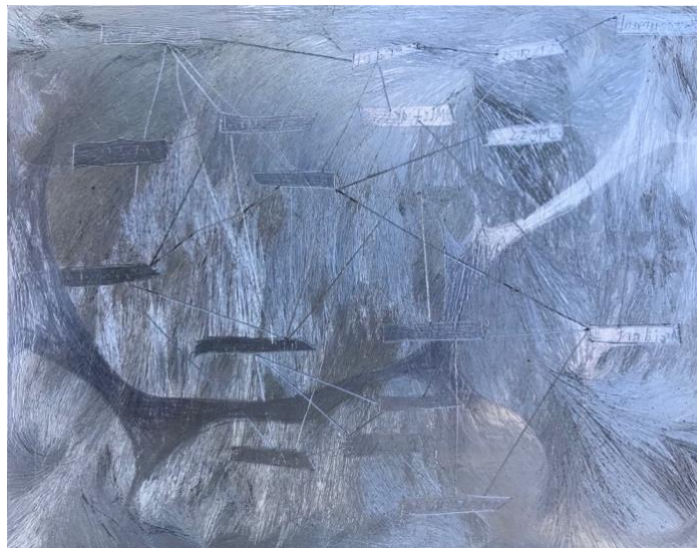


Fig. 5. Zinc plate for *Growing, enveloping*, 2019

The marks in *Growing, enveloping* are constantly changing and evolving with each print, a part of the image is permanently closed off while a new aspect is introduced. The lines are rapidly changing. The words in the prints are constantly coming and going, moving the story along. But, again, the zinc plate that made the prints holds my attention more.

I am drawn to the memory that you cannot see—the prints are just proof of my adoration for this plate and the time I spent with it.





Fig. 6. Madeleine DeMichele, *Hold (v.)*, watercolor monoprint, 10.5" x 14.5", 2021

I wrote down a word, backwards, on a plate of film to create *Hold (v.)*. I slowly began to play with the ends of the first and last letters, bringing them to opposite sides of the page. The central letter started to grow and take over, focusing the emerging blob and making sure it got enough attention. Sometimes the middles of words feel left out. The first letter is always acknowledged properly, but the middle letters disappear and wanted recognition this time. The image begins to transform and looks nothing like the word. I wanted to hide these words—at first out of fear of vulnerability, and then out of desire to tell the same story differently.

All of a sudden, the image is both completely about the word and it's not at all; it becomes a landscape and it starts to move. It is hiding a word, and the letters become shapes that provide the foundation for movement and transformation across the page. After some time has passed and the lines have grown, they are mostly hidden, and the word is invisible. It's okay, because it was never really about the word. Without the word there would be no image. *You kept asking "what did it say? what does it say?" You are missing it. The blob is working just as hard to communicate with you.* When the text camouflages among the wavy lines and other abstract

shapes it is confusing, because the text's entire purpose has been stripped away. What is left is what we have to live with. There are pieces of debris and there are remains.

But landfills are defined by their remains, and trash slowly works to displace the dirt and changes the topography of the land.

#### IV. TRASH, LAND, IMPRESSION

Landfills are labeled Superfund Sites once the chemical toxicity of the waste in the ground is deemed hazardous enough to require long-term cleanup and immediate action, dangerously polluting the groundwater, dirt, and air.<sup>4</sup> There are currently 39 sites on the Superfund list in the state of Missouri.<sup>5</sup> Most landfills are covered up and left alone when they reach capacity, if they do not prove hazardous enough to the surrounding environment. Chemicals from our waste are irreversibly altering the land.

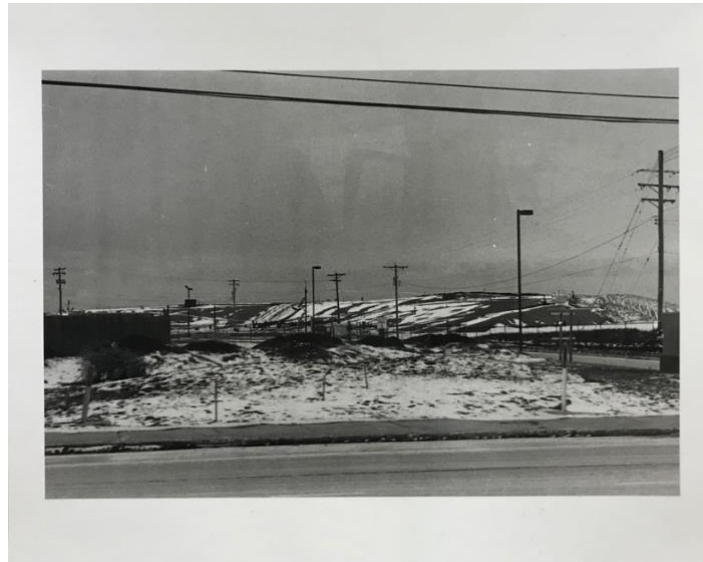


Fig. 7. Madeleine DeMichele, *West Lake Landfill Superfund Site, Bridgeton MO, Feb. 12, 2021. IV*, gelatin silver print, 8" x 10", 2021

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<sup>4</sup> Environmental Protection Agency "What Is Superfund?" *EPA*, [www.epa.gov/superfund/what-superfund](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/what-superfund).

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Protection Agency "Search for Superfund Sites Where You Live." *EPA*, [www.epa.gov/superfund/search-superfund-sites-where-you-live](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/search-superfund-sites-where-you-live).



Fig. 8 (right). Madeleine DeMichele, *Phone Lines are Falling at WLLSS*, cyanotype, watercolor monoprint, colored pencil, muslin, 35" x 46", 2021

Silver gelatin photographs are made with chemicals that alter the surface they are exposed to. The sensitive paper is exposed to light and then immediately changes when it touches the developer as the image slowly appears. Soil is similarly affected when surrounded by collections of trash. Chemical binds with the photographic paper and changes both its appearance and its physical makeup. Chemical strips away life-sustaining properties and nutrients of soil. Chemical seeps into the fibers of muslin, dyes it deep blue, and never leaves. Soil, paper, and fabric absorb water alike. They are all changed by the chemical.

“How does a gathering become a ‘happening,’ that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1973, the first meeting between The Soil in Bridgeton, Missouri and The Contaminated Soil of “the radioactive material originated with uranium-ore-processing residues”

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<sup>6</sup>Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. (Princeton University Press, 2015), 27.

took place.<sup>7</sup> The records of this contaminated encounter<sup>8</sup>, have taken the form of research papers and data sets. But the records of this encounter are also the stories about the exchange of waste material for land and of discarded objects being traded from corporation to corporation before being dumped on land seen as “fit” to house the trash.<sup>9</sup> Land will never regenerate in the same way.



Fig. 9. Elias Sime, *Tightrope: Noiseless I*, Reclaimed electrical wires and components on panel, 113” x 173.3”, 2019

Our precious, story-holding objects are the very thing contaminating the land. Elias Sime presents this contradiction in *Tightrope: Noiseless I*, where a landscape constructed from unrecyclable material appears recognizable as aerial land, while the shine of electrical wires and circuit boards catch the light and suddenly abstract the shapes of material. The delicately woven wires form organic lines, referencing organic material, but they do not camouflage well. The

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commissions, Division of Industrial and Medical Nuclear Safety, Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards, *Radioactive Material in the West Lake Landfill, Summary Report*. NUREG-1308, Rev. 1, 1988 <https://semspub.epa.gov/work/07/40055920.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commissions, Division of Industrial and Medical Nuclear Safety, Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards, *Radioactive Material in the West Lake Landfill, Summary Report*.

work feels sour. The lines draw me in and then all of a sudden, I'm saddened looking at the sheer scale of waste in front of me. Its permanence is once again reinforced. Its impression is undeniable.

**“print.** *See* command. The first sense was of a mark pressed in, as a *footprint*; this remains in the *printed* word.”<sup>10</sup>

A footprint is two things: the action the leg and foot working in tandem to take a step, and the mark left behind on the ground. We leave an impression on the land with every step and every object we discard. “Waste is no longer imagined as an excess substance that can be of eliminated from the human world.”<sup>11</sup> Actions leave permanent impressions on a landscape—a footprint in the mud, a drypoint line on a copper plate.

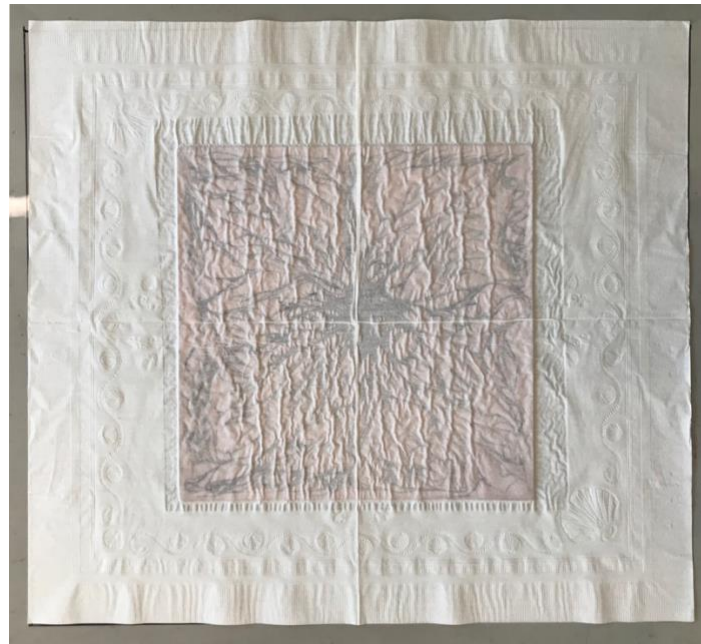


Fig. 10. Madeleine DeMichele, mid-print for *Toxicity Spectacle*, 2021

The impression on the napkin above is permanent but also only barely visible. It looks gentle, as if the plate didn't crush the napkin so severely it almost tore. As I soak it in water, the

<sup>10</sup> Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014,) 283.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste*. (The MIT Press, 2019), 77.



fibers start to loosen up and absorb as much as they can. They start to become less attached to each other as the water infiltrates the compact layers. The strength of the plate and the water is no match for the fragile napkin, it starts to shrivel as soon as it becomes damp. Once they are squished and compressed again, the fibers are permanently re-aligned, unable to return to their original form and placement. The mark is now irreversible. The surface of the material will never forget the impression. Our objects have a similar effect on the land they are buried in.

## V. LOOKING OUT

Napkins absorb material and are marketed to catch and erase mistakes. Napkins absorb coffee spills like the dirt absorbs trash. Napkins are inextricably linked to consumption. We use napkins to clean up our messes, but they are just the middleman. These napkins close the gap between the plate, myself, and the land. These napkins are proof of my feelings, of my location, and of my care for each letter in the alphabet. They hold all this information and are good at reminding me of these encounters. They connect events to material. They act as a record keeper and as a timeline, but they also act as a grounding agent: constantly reassuring me of the invisible tether that connects my body to the grass I stand on. I will always be looking for stories hidden in the materials and letters around me.



Fig. 11. Madeleine DeMichele, *Toxicity Spectacle* and detail image, drypoint, paper napkins, turmeric powder, clothespins, installation is roughly 80" long, 2021

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